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HOW TO MAKE
THE PRAYER-MEETING
EFFECTIVE

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HOW TO MAKE THE PRAYER-MEETING EFFECTIVE.*

"THE trouble with the Congregational prayer-meeting is that it needs to be born again." So said a brilliant young preacher of the Congregational order, in the hearing of the writer, at a union meeting of the clergy of various religious bodies, held not long ago in one of the most flourishing of our New England cities. The remark was received with somewhat of merriment by his auditors, dissipated only by the evident earnestness of the speaker. He meant what he said; before the meeting closed the conviction was general that a similar new birth was needed in nearly all the prayer-meetings of the Churches there represented. So is it well-nigh every-where. Here and there, it is true, one may find a mid-week meeting where the attendance is large, the exercises conducted with enthusiasm and power, the singing what it should be—every thing, in short, speaking of spiritual fervor, of joyous, willing service; but of meetings of this sort the number is confessedly small. In

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***Originally published in *The Christian Advocate*.**

the vast majority of instances the meetings for prayer are but slimly attended, the exercises dull, pointless, and lifeless, the singing miserable and ineffective, the results disappointing in the extreme; so much so that were many of our brethren in the ministry to speak the secret thoughts of their hearts they would confess that for the average prayer-meeting one of two things would seem to be inevitable—the new birth of the Congregationalist's desire or utter abandonment of the meeting in question.

To some certainly it is a burden far beyond that of the preparation and delivery of the two sermons ordinarily required for each recurring Sabbath, or the manifold requirements of pastoral work. It is the weekly terror. As with the "dry bones" of Ezekiel's vision, so with these meetings; can they be made to live, to stand up, "an exceeding great army?"

We think they can. How? First, by the formation and development of right ideas as to the function, plan, and scope of the meeting under consideration.

Let a definite conclusion be reached as to the kind of meeting out of which the largest good, both for the church and congregation, young and old, saint and sinner, may be secured—the meeting most liable to attract, cheer, elevate, stimulate, and substantially profit, amid the rush and whirl of the busy days of the secular week—a matter of no little difficulty, it must be confessed, in the presence of the many and widely divergent opinions and customs prevalent in various parts of the country. In some Churches—Methodist included—the idea prevails that the prayer-meeting should be just what the title would imply, a meeting for prayer, and that only. A hymn is announced, generally one of five or six stanzas, after which some brother is asked to lead in prayer; then another hymn and another prayer; then the repetition of the order just gone through with; more hymns, more prayers, a Scripture reading, a short talk, another hymn, another prayer, the collection, and the benediction; this is the unvarying order. All of which may be of interest to the few that may chance to be present, but all of which the average outside sinner is apt to regard an unmitigated bore.

What are the results? Ordinarily empty seats, empty hearts, absence of life, absence of power, absence of men, of children, of almost every thing, in short, calculated to satisfy the desires and needs of tired, weary, discouraged souls longing for bread and receiving in lieu thereof a stone.

Not that prayer—real, genuine prayer—is not an essential, a primary necessity of any well-conducted social meeting in a Christian church, but rather that there is nothing in such a meeting to draw the attention and enlist the attendance of any save the "saints" bound to be on hand in any event. Cultivate that sort of a meeting as your ideal, and you will have your labor only for your pains. The people of your church, your young people, in particular, will not be there.

In other Churches—Methodist included—we find that the idea of a meeting for prayer has given place to that of the "weekly lecture," as it is called, by which is really meant a weekly sermon service, the exercises differing in no material points from those of the regular Sunday morning preaching service.

Again, what are the results? Here and there crowded audiences, the outward semblances of social life, together with evidence, more or less distinct, of the presence of revival spirit and power, particularly where the minister is a man of large personality or unusually endowed with moral and spiritual gifts, or where, on the other hand, some musical genius has been found capable of throwing into the service the wealth of inspiration usually accompanying the adequate exercise of the marvelous power of Christian song.

The gifts of the preacher are so transcendent that the meeting becomes simply the theater for the exercise of his own peculiar powers. The people are but receiving reservoirs, commonly with underground sluice-ways. Generally speaking, the lecture service exists only because the prayer-meeting has perished through the apathy and spiritual deadness of the membership. The preacher is paid for running the religious machine, for doing the preaching, the praying, sometimes even the listening for the whole congregation, and he does it.

The church he has the hardship to serve enrolls six hundred names upon its records, "many of them among our most distinguished families," of whom some seventy-five—sixty women, ten men, and five children—attend occasionally the week-night lecture. That meeting should, and easily might, have an attendance of at least three hundred, instead of a beggarly seventy-five.

Elsewhere other forms of service prevail. Some have "talking" meetings, others continual praise services; attractive, doubtless, in their way, but to many utterly barren of mental grip and real spiritual force.

Of these various forms of week-night services each may be said to have valuable features worthy of special consideration and adoption. The stereotyped character of each is, perhaps, the leading objection to be urged against them. Probably the best plan is to establish an ideal which shall comprehend their several excellences. In the opinion of the writer—an opinion, if he may be pardoned the personal reference, based on an experience of many years in the conduct of some of the largest, most enthusiastic, and successful prayer-meetings held in this country—the true idea of a mid-week meeting, whether held in city or in country, is one that shall be neither all praise, nor all prayer, nor all testimony, nor all exhortation, but the combination of each, and in endless variety as to sequence and order. Ever should it be borne in mind that the great purpose of the gathering is the development, strengthening, and enrichment of the spiritual life of all concerned. To this end every exercise should be made subservient. Above all should it be remembered that it is the people's meeting, not the minister's.

It is the social gathering for evening prayer and praise and conference of the entire household of faith. As such its true type is the gathering of the members of a thoroughly religious household for evening prayer—a gathering wherein there is neither the stiffness nor the formality of the usual public service, which begins and ends in a thoroughly social way, and in which all, parents and children, even to the youngest, have the privilege, and are taught the duty, of participation. To secure such a meeting, however, is not an easy task, at least in the beginning. It will be the outcome of thought, of prayer, of a world of patient effort.

To realize it one must work, if he be a preacher, as assiduously as he works for the building of his sermon or the accomplishment of his pastoral tasks. In himself he must be an organized prayer-meeting; if he is his church will be one likewise. To succeed let him make of himself a prayer-meeting recruiting sergeant, inviting ceaselessly his people to the "place where prayer is wont to be made." Let no pastoral visit end without mention of the prayer-meeting. Let each man know that if absent he is missed. Let the children be invited; without them a prayer-meeting audience loses half its charm.

When the time of meeting comes be on hand to welcome the people, meet them with a good handshake, a pleasant smile, and an encouraging word. Quietly ask forty or fifty of them to participate in the exercises of the hour; welcome them as heartily as you would in your own home—more particularly the poorer members of your flock. At the close of the service tell the people not to hurry away; that while "recognition in heaven" is a comforting doctrine recognition on earth is far more needed for the present good. As you talk with those who linger quietly thank as many as possible for the words spoken or for prayers offered. Assure that timid woman, who is yet hardly recovered from the "stage-fright" of her first public testimony how much good her confession of Christ did for the meeting. Urge that young man who stumbled woefully in his prayer to be sure to try again, together with more of similar import. When the meeting begins study to feel the spirit generally prevalent, the atmosphere, as it were, of the gathering. If the people take hold of the singing with peculiar enthusiasm, let them sing to their hearts' content. If the spirit be that of prayer, "pray without ceasing." If confession be the uppermost thought, "let the redeemed of the Lord say so."

If you have in your mind a particular plan for that particular meeting, and the plan doesn't seem to work easily, abandon it with joy, believing that the Lord has provided a better.

Do not attempt to guide the meeting overmuch, to "lead" it as the saying goes. Give the Head of the Church a chance. If it goes off at a tangent from the direction you have desired it take, let it go. Take your hand from the helm and let the good ship drive on. God may be in that driving. Remember that you have asked the Holy Spirit to lead that meeting. Did you mean it? If so, let him do it.

If you are presiding do not occupy time belonging to others. Do not call for fifty prayers and fifty testimonies, and then talk for the space of an hour yourself. See to it that in the meeting the word of God shall have great prominence. No meeting in which its great truths are quoted, argued, emphasized, can be a failure. Frequently call for the recitation of its mighty promises. Saturate, indeed, the exercises with the Bible. Diversify the exercises in as many ways as possible. Knock out all sameness, all prolixity, all wearisome repetitions, all sleepiness, all " prayer-meeting killers," all bores. When you sing let it be with the spirit and the understanding. Do not permit soloists to perform for their own gratification and to the disgust of the people. Do not allow any one who may please to " pitch the tune." If you shall he may pitch it to the heavens above, or to the earth beneath, anywhere indeed but where it should be. If possible have a trained musician, a good organ, or a good piano. Let all have the place, all start together, all keep together to the end.

During the progress of the meeting keep good-natured, serene, hopeful, confident, no matter how long the " awful pauses," how dreary the testimony, how empty the prayers, how discordant the music; neither scowl, nor look mad, nor scold, nor fret, nor lash the people who are not there over the heads of those who are. Smile amid the storm. Smile like an angel! Sing, pray, wait, trust. Believe that all will end well. If it shall not, if the sense of defeat be upon you, do not say so. Let it go. If you are on a sand-bank, back off, and next time try to keep in deeper water. At the close do not sing, "How sad our state by nature is," all of which is doubtless true enough, but a good whole-souled doxology that shall make the devil tremble for the victory he has apparently secured. Never let a congregation go away in the dumps. Be not afraid of good cheer. If a smile shall ripple over the faces of the people, even if the smile shall become a ripple of laughter, yea, even an explosion, do not fear; do not think that it is necessarily of the devil. Behind the smile, the laugh, the explosion, are tears. Touch but the right chords, and they will fall as do showers in summer-time.

In such a meeting the struggle will be not to "fill up the time," but to close in decent season. To such a meeting people will come; you cannot keep them away. To miss it will be a loss not to be afforded. Such meetings exist; they may be, they should be, multiplied. Once they were the glory of Methodism. Let the old altar-fires be rekindled!